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SUBJECT: MINOR CANDIDATE COALITION CONTRADICTORY AND
UNFOCUSED

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Minor presidential candidates Dr. Mohammed Nasir Aniss, Bashir Bizhan, and Hedaiat Amin Arsallah separately confirmed to us recent rumors and media stories about a coalition of presidential candidates calling itself "The Coordination Council of the Presidential Election Candidates." Arsallah told Ambassador Eikenberry on July 22 that between 20-24 candidates have met to discuss the possibility of selecting a single candidate to remain in the race; he asserted that other coalition members would drop out and rally behind the selected lead for the remaining four-weeks of the campaign period. While candidates claimed this was for the good of Afghanistan, Arsallah said for some the purpose was financial gain, noting the group was now negotiating with Abdullah on that basis. Each candidate outlined the same basic "coalition" concept, but the numerous incongruent messages suggest there is little cohesion or future. End Summary.

Coming Together for Afghanistan?

¶2. (SBU) In a July 20 meeting, Aniss, a medical doctor without prior political experience, offered his perspective on the coalition of candidates and their intentions; an issue he first mentioned at a July 15 lunch with the Ambassador (reftel). Aniss said that no one candidate could win the election on their own - even Karzai - and said early recognition of this limitation is a strength. For that reason, and because Aniss saw a second round of polling as divisive for Afghanistan and "a waste of money," he had initiated meetings with other candidates with similar platforms. He asserted only four other candidates came to the first meeting, but by the most recent seventh meeting 25 were in attendance.

¶3. (SBU) Aniss explained that the candidates would work together to develop a criteria for a president and choose who amongst themselves is the best match. Once agreed on, all but the chosen candidate would drop out of the election, providing the new campaign their active support. He suggested that each of the eliminated candidates would travel to a province and act as a surrogate, garnering support for the group cause and putting coalition candidate among the top three, alongside Karzai and Ashraf Ghani. Arsallah, however, believed he should be anointed because, as he told Ambassador Eikenberry on July 22, he had the "highest" chance among the presidential candidates in the coalition.

¶4. (SBU) Aniss said that he had invited Karzai to participate in the coalition on three separate occasions but had not received a response. He noted that Karzai would not automatically be the chosen candidate, but commented that many candidates were not well known and were running low on funds. Arsallah claimed to be an old friend of Karzai, noting that Karzai had sent his people to negotiate for his support. He said Afghanistan needed change, and regretted

that Karzai was no longer a solution because he aligned himself with former warlords that were "incompetent, corrupt, and cruel."

Or To Increase Personal Standing?

15. (SBU) On July 21, Bizhan, a long-time opposition party activist well-known as a critic of the United States and the media spokesman for the coalition, portrayed a different perspective to us. He said candidates knew the elections would not be free, fair or transparent so they had come together - with Bizhan as the organizer - with the intent of nominating a single candidate from amongst themselves and to dissuade fraud. He described three types of candidates registered in the election: A) those known to the public - such as Karzai, Ashraf Ghani, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, Sayed Jalal, Mirwais Yaseni and Hedayat Amin Arsala - but tainted by their connection to government and therefore corruption; B) those with little local power, funding or strategy, but wishing to force attention to themselves; and C) Bizhan - in a category by himself. However, Bizhan separately claimed to the media that two of the candidates he decried - Arsala and Abdullah - were part of the coalition. The one candidate Bizhan was firm that the coalition would never support was Karzai.

16. (SBU) Bizhan asserted that he was the only candidate that had a strategy, support from many groups - although he did not identify any - and separation from the problems of the Karzai government. Bizhan claimed his strength came from his

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continued opposition to the post-Taliban government and the "illegal" presence of international forces in Afghanistan. He believed the public perceives Karzai, Abdullah and Ghani as liars due to their affiliation with "a corrupt slave government." He posited that due to his credibility thanks to long-time opposition, if he were to decide to support the United States and the presence of international forces, the people would listen. Contradicting statements he has made to the media that the coalition will have to decide on a lead, Bizhan repeatedly asserted that he was the "only possible candidate" the group could align behind.

Or For the Money or Publicity?

17. (SBU) A former Jalal and current Abdullah campaign worker provided an alternative reason for the coalition; alleging that the group had come together to negotiate with better known candidates as a block. The campaigner said a member had approached both Jalal and Abdullah offering group support for cash payoffs of the members who drop out of the race. He claimed the individuals had demanded up to USD 100,000 for some candidates to drop out, while others had small price-tags; he reported both Jalal and Abdullah had refused the offer.

18. (SBU) Arsallah said his campaign was running out of money because he did not have Karzai's government funds, Abdullah's foreign "donations", nor the mafia support given to other candidates. (COMMENT: We have heard this statement in one form or another from all the candidates except Abdullah and Karzai, including Yaseni. End Comment). He estimated Karzai spent between 85-90 million USD in the last two weeks. Local media reports on the coalition have not been favorable; one typical remark from a Tajik MP called the coalition "hopeless" and publicity-seeking. The disparate views highlight the lack of coordination, messaging and support among candidates - even those that claim to be working together.
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